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ABSTRACT

This digest examines peer review, focusing on how these types of reviews can improve teacher competence. Peer review is often linked to peer assistance, which helps new and veteran teachers improve their knowledge and skills. In peer-review programs, consulting teachers conduct formal evaluations and recommend whether the participating teacher should be retained or let go. Programs in Columbus and Toledo, Ohio, have shown that peer review not only helps schools retain teachers, it also provides ongoing evaluations for teachers. Some of the potential benefits of peer review include more teachers receiving help and more incompetent teachers being dismissed. Under peer review, teachers take a more active role in their progression, and teachers and principals can become allies in improving teaching standards. However, critics of peer review say that it presents legal problems for local union affiliates in that consulting teachers could be classified as supervisors and thus lose their bargaining-unit status. Those opposing peer review also claim that it does not address the real problems that lie behind teacher quality. Overall, the future of peer review remains uncertain; currently, only a handful of districts practice peer review, making it difficult to draw conclusions. (RJM)

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ED 429 343

Peer Review of Teachers

By Elizabeth Hertling

Recently, Massachusetts implemented a new teacher-licensing exam that contained an eleventh-grade-level literacy skills test. More than 55 percent of the teacher candidates, all college seniors or graduates, initially failed to pass (AFT and NEA 1998). Incidents such as these have fueled the public's desire for a greater accountability in education—and in teachers. How can we ensure teacher quality?

For many, peer review is the answer. While peer review has been practiced in a handful of districts since the 1980s, it attracted renewed attention recently, when delegates to the NEA's convention voted to drop their longstanding opposition to peer review. This is part of the union's new unionism, in which they advocate teachers taking greater responsibility for school quality (Bradley, June 1998).

Peer review stepped into the national spotlight even more recently with California's peer assistance and review law, which allocates $41 million in incentive funds for districts that negotiate peer-review programs by July 1, 2000, and threatens to withhold up to $400 million in aid from districts that miss a January 1, 2000, deadline (Johnston 1999)

What Is Peer Review?

Peer review is often linked to peer assistance, which helps new and veteran teachers improve their knowledge and skills. Experienced consulting teachers serve as mentors to new teachers or to veteran teachers who are experiencing problems unrelated to absenteeism or substance abuse. By providing support through observing, sharing ideas and skills, and recommending useful materials for study, consulting teachers strive to improve teacher quality (AFT and NEA).

In peer-review programs, consulting teachers conduct formal evaluations and recommend whether the participating teacher should be retained or let go. A common misconception regarding peer review is that consulting teachers have the final authority to make decisions regarding employment. In reality, while the local union shares responsibility with the school district to review teachers' performance and make recommendations, the final employment decision is made by the district administrator and the board of education (AFT and NEA).

Most peer review does not exist without some form of peer assistance. "Peer review without intensive peer assistance for the teachers in the program does not represent sound educational policy," state the AFT and the NEA. While much attention has focused on the idea of teachers helping to dismiss incompetent colleagues, most programs devote more time and resources to mentoring new teachers. Bob Chase, president of the NEA, notes, "To characterize peer assistance and review as getting rid of bad teachers... is a gross misrepresentation of what it's all about" (Bradley, June 1998).

What Are Some Examples of Peer-Review Programs?

One well-known example of peer review exists in Columbus, Ohio. Created in 1986, the Columbus Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) Program serves 4,800 teachers. The PAR program requires all new teachers, even those with previous teaching experience, to work with a consulting, or mentor, teacher. Struggling experienced teachers can enter the program either voluntarily or through teacher or administrator recommendation (Gutloff).

Consulting teachers are released from the classroom for three years, and after serving their term return to teaching. For reviewing and providing assistance to their colleagues, they receive a stipend equal to 20 percent of their base pay. They are required to make at least twenty visits to the classroom and conduct one-on-one conferences with the participating teacher to help set goals. At the end of the year, consulting teachers recommend to a panel whether the employment of the new and veteran teachers in their caseload should be continued (Gufloff).

The results? Twenty percent of veteran teachers who go through intervention leave the school system (Gutloff). Eighty percent of new teachers are still on the job five years later, while in other urban districts without peer review, 50 percent of new hires leave after five years (Bradley, June 1998).

The NEA affiliate in Toledo, Ohio, pioneered peer review in 1981, creating the Toledo Plan. Praised by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the Toledo Plan is one of the best-known peer-review programs in the country. Similar to PAR, new teachers as well as veteran teachers are assisted and evaluated by consulting teachers. However, new teachers also have the option of continuing to meet with their mentor during their second year of teaching as well (AFT and NEA).

Unlike most peer-review programs, Toledo's does not exist in conjunction with periodic principal evaluations. In January 1998, the program was contested when principals argued that 41 percent of teachers in the district weren't evaluated regularly. In a compromise, principals are now allowed to refer teachers to the program instead of having to seek union approval (Bradley, January 1998).

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What Are the Potential Benefits of Peer Review?

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future claims that more teachers have received help and more incompetent teachers have been dismissed under peer review than under traditional methods of evaluation. In Cincinnati, almost twice as many teachers were dismissed under peer review as under administrator evaluations (U.S. Department of Education 1998).

Supporters of peer review say that it is superior to traditional principal evaluation, which is often hurried and inadequately measures teacher performance. Smith and Scott (1990) note that "evaluation strategies that rely on standardized checklists and other bureaucratic methods continue to be widely used even though they contribute little to teacher growth." The NEA and AFT argue that consulting teachers impose higher standards than principals do "because they know full well that they suffer the consequences of incompetent colleagues in immediate and demoralizing ways." Along with the higher standards also comes ample opportunity for teachers to improve; as long as teachers are making progress, most programs allow them to stay in intervention.

Under peer review, teachers take a more active role in their profession, advocates contend. Tom Mooney, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, believes teachers—and their unions—need to take more responsibility to self-police their profession: "It's pretty tough to say that we ought to have a predominant say in programs, curriculum, methods, and books, and then say the review of professional practice is somebody else's job" (Bradley). In addition, Smith and Scott say peer review transforms teachers and principals from adversaries to allies in improving teaching standards and combats the climate of isolation that exists in many schools.

What Are the Potential Problems of Peer Review?

Critics of peer review say that it presents legal problems for local union affiliates. In collective-bargaining states, consulting teachers could be classified as supervisors and loose their bargaining-unit status. Simpson (1997) argues that local affiliates can avoid this problem by negotiating with the school district to include a clause that allows consulting teachers to remain in the bargaining unit. The NEA advises affiliates to make this a prerequisite when setting up a peer-review program.

Others criticize peer review because they say it conflicts with the union's duty of fair representation. Critics worry that peer review will present a conflict of interest for the union (Simpson). The NEA and AFT argue that the union is not obliged to handle every member's grievance, but must instead be fair and consistent. In Cincinnati, teacher grievances arising from peer review are handled separately from the joint union-district panels governing the program, thus avoiding conflicts with fair representation (Bradley, June 1998).

Critics also say that peer review does not address the real problems that lie behind teacher quality. Wroth (1998) argues that unions should focus instead on tenure laws, which cost the average district $60,000 and two to three years to fire one teacher.

Others say administrators are already trained and paid to evaluate, and should be allowed to do their job. Wroth argues that if principals cannot give adequate evaluations, then reform should focus on strengthening principals' skills. He asserts that "good schools need strong principals, but they rarely get them in a system where principals know they aren't responsible for the quality of their teachers."

What Is the Future of Peer Review?

The new law in California has many talking about the future of peer review. Bradley (June 1998) says the aspect of peer review that is likely to become important in the future is its ability to retain new teachers longer through its first-year intern programs. As student enrollment continues to grow and increasing numbers of teachers reach retirement, districts must continually hire more and more new teachers.

Overall, the future of peer review remains uncertain. Currently, only a handful of districts practice peer review, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Peer-review programs require a high level of union-management trust and cooperation, which is sometimes difficult to achieve. Despite this and other potential problems, for some school districts and now the state of California, the potential benefits of peer review are considered to outweigh its difficulties.

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